

TRY IT NOW

FELTMAKING *in Argyll and Bute*

Tina Walsh heads north of the border to the breathtaking *Cowal Peninsula* to learn the venerable craft of feltmaking

Legend has it that feltmaking was discovered by Saints Christopher and Clement, the patron saints of travellers and hatters respectively, who packed their sandals with wool to make them more comfortable. The sweat and friction caused the wool to become matted, creating the world's first socks. Whether or not this is true, felt has a long and venerable history, and is used to make everything from hats and handbags to rugs, tents, carpets and even industrial materials.

Orains Design Partnership, based in Colintraive on the beautiful Cowal Peninsula in Argyll and Bute, is carrying on this esteemed tradition. Run by Pieter van der Werf and Fiona



HAVING A GO
Tina Walsh gets to grips with the art of feltmaking at Orains Design Partnership in Colintraive

Page, the company was set up in 2012. Using local sheep breeds – Scottish Blackface, Jacob and Hebridean – they make lampshades, wall hangings, rugs, floor throws and blankets. ‘Fiona and I like to know where all our wool comes from, so we collect it from the sheep farmers ourselves, probably around 125 fleeces a year,’ says Pieter.

As well as undertaking private commissions, school projects and home visits, Orains exhibits its work in galleries such as the Caol Ruadh Sculpture Park, just round the corner from the studio. It's set in magnificent grounds, tucked away on Argyll's Secret Coast, on the shores of Loch Fyne and the Kyles of Bute, and is well worth a visit if you've got time.

10AM THE LOWDOWN

I don't think I'll be making socks today, but I'm looking forward to what the workshop at Orains has in store. Over coffee and biscuits, Katrina, who's joining me on the workshop today, and I are given an introduction to feltmaking and wool. ‘It has so many qualities and is totally biodegradable,’ says Pieter enthusiastically.

Once we've run through some basic housekeeping – ‘Watch your fingers in the carding machine!’ – we walk round to the back of the studio, where baskets of pre-prepared skins have already been washed, ready for us to use today.

10.30AM GETTING FLEECE

Pieter shows us a Jacob fleece that he's just brought in and lays it





ASK *the* PRO



Lindsey Tyson of Scarborough, North Yorkshire, has been a textile designer for 20

years. Ten years ago she went on a felting course and has been hooked on the craft ever since. She makes luxury scarves and wraps, as well as cushions, vases, bowls and, her personal favourite, ornamental felt pebbles. She also holds beginners' and advanced workshops, with nuno felting, a technique developed in Australia in the early 1990s, being her area of expertise.

'I like to work with lots of different mediums and processes,' says Lindsey. 'It's the versatility of felting that appeals to me. It's a magic process; you can make everything from fine, floaty wraps to thick, three-dimensional sculptures – and there's no sewing involved.'

To find out more, visit lindseytyson.co.uk.





out on a sheet on the floor. It looks enormous, although a professional shearer can apparently work their way through 1,000 similar-sized sheep a day. After tearing the unwashed fleece, which has a strong, waxy smell, into pieces, Pieter puts them in a plastic tub. They'll soak overnight in water, with a drop of Ecover washing-up liquid, which helps bind the fibres together, as well as clean it.

Another tub contains bits that have already been washed. There's a marked difference in the wool: the yellow colour has turned white and the texture is a lot softer. Plus, it doesn't pong. 'We never let dirty wool into the studio,' says Pieter, as if reading my thoughts.

11.30AM CARD SHARP

Before we can start to work with it, the wool has to be carded to straighten the fibres. 'If you didn't card it you'd have tough, uneven bits that would be difficult to work with. Carding by hand takes a long time, so we use a drum carder,' says Pieter. This particular machine is hand-cranked (some of them are electric) and has two rollers, or drums: a smaller one into which the wool is fed and a larger one that stores it. Pieter feeds the wool into the machine, repeating the process four times until the pieces, or 'batts', are

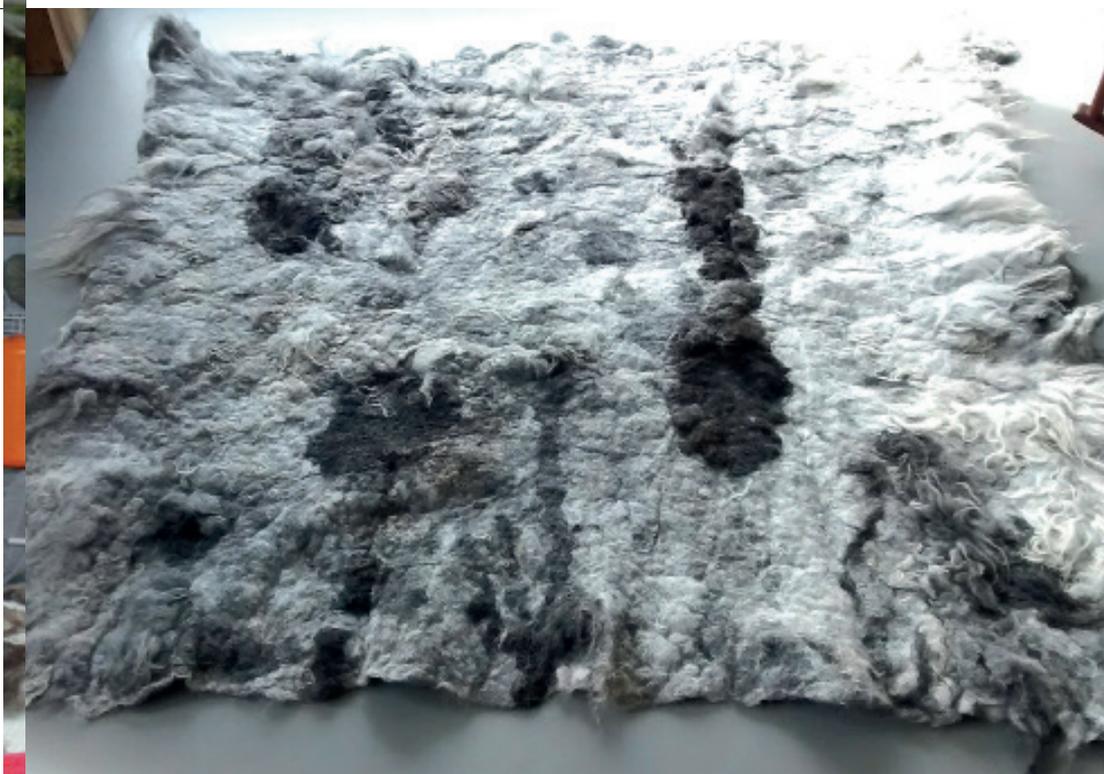
ready to use. He picks them out of the storage drum with a big metal pin and lays them out on the huge square worktable.

12PM RUNNER UP

We're now ready to start work. After initially deciding to make a blanket, I change my mind – probably a bit ambitious for a first attempt – in favour of a runner. Thanks to the shredding and carding, the pieces of wool have taken on an attractive marbled effect, and the shades of grey, black and chocolate brown will look just the job on my polished wooden living-room floor. The worktable is now a sea of wool and Pieter tells us to choose the bits we want. He then rolls out two long pieces of bubble wrap (you can also use tulle or woven bamboo), which he places either side of the table, one for me and one for Katrina.

12.30PM THE HOLE THING

I take my pieces of wool and, one by one, begin placing them on the bubble wrap, making sure – Pieter comes round to check – I've not left any gaps. 'You don't want any bald patches, otherwise you'll end up with holes in the finished product,' he warns. The layering process is repeated four times and I end up with a long, fluffy-looking



roll, which is starting to take on the shape of a runner, even if it is about six inches thick.

After lunch – homemade tomato soup, smoked salmon, olives and fresh brown bread, with strawberries and ice cream for dessert – in Pieter and Fiona's living room, with its fantastic wrap-round views of Loch Riddon, we get back to work.

1.30PM TAKING SHAPE

My unfinished runner is ready to be rolled up. But before I do that I need to sprinkle it with water, and another drop of Ecover, to bind the fibres together even more. Pieter obligingly fills a watering can and I 'water' my wool. He then lays a second layer of bubble wrap over the top and shows me how to roll the whole thing into a tube, which he then wraps in an old sheet (I find out why in a minute) and secures with rubber bands. I'm left with what looks like an enormous pupa.

2PM CLASSICAL WORKOUT

I now have to roll my giant insect (the sheet stops the bubble wrap from sticking) in the same way as you would roll out pastry with a rolling pin, for at least 20 minutes. Pieter puts on some Mozart to 'aid the rolling process'. It's hard work, but after a while the

ABOVE Tina's finished felt runner has an attractive marbled effect, thanks to the blending of fleeces of different breeds
OPPOSITE Pieter oversees Tina and Katrina as they try their hand at the different processes involved in feltmaking, including shredding, carding, watering and rolling out the fleeces

rocking motion becomes rather therapeutic, plus it's a good upper-arm workout. The friction created by the rolling will cause the damp fibres to gel (and turn into felt), ensuring that the finished product doesn't fall apart.

2.30PM ONE MORE GO

Pieter tells me he thinks my piece might be ready so I unroll the tube but, after inspecting it, he decides it's still a bit flimsy and needs more work. I give it another 25 minutes, by which time it feels much more compact. He unrolls it again and it looks like it's shrunk. 'That's OK, the wool shrinks by about 10 per cent and is a normal part of the process,' he reassures me. 'It will shrink again once it's been rinsed.'

3.15PM THE FINISHED PRODUCT

The wool is still sudsy from the washing-up liquid and has to be thoroughly rinsed out. Pieter puts the runner in to the washing machine for 10 minutes before taking it out and hanging it on a clotheshorse, where it will take a few hours to dry out. And, hey presto, I have what looks like a very professional runner, which I reckon wouldn't look out of place in Heal's soft furnishings department. It certainly looks good on my living-room floor.

NEED to KNOW

HOW TO GET STARTED

To find out more about courses at Orains, visit orains.com or call Pieter or Fiona on 01700 841705. Discover feltmaking courses and workshops throughout the UK at Craft Courses (craftcourses.com). The International Feltmakers Association (feltmakers.com) also has information on courses and exhibitions and how to promote your work.

HOW TO GET THERE

Virgin Trains (virgintrains.co.uk) runs services from London Euston to Glasgow Central. Scotrail (scotrail.co.uk) operates a service from Glasgow Central to Gourock; from there it's a 30-minute ferry ride (argyllferries.co.uk) to Dunoon. Pieter or Fiona can pick you up from Dunoon, which is 40 minutes by car from Orains.

WHERE TO STAY

Portavadie (portavadiemarina.com) is a sleek, modern hotel complex on Loch Fyne. It has its own marina, two restaurants and accommodation ranging from standard rooms to luxury villas and fully serviced yachts. A spa is due to open in summer 2015. Prices start at £59 per room per night, including continental breakfast.

WHAT IT COSTS

A half-day's workshop at Orains Design Partnership costs £40 per person, including all materials and refreshments. A full day is £70, including lunch and a small piece of felting to take home with you.